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April 1997

It's a
beautiful
day
in
the

Neverhood

Dream Works

from the mind of computer-games guru Doug TenNapel

It's a beautiful

day in the

Neverhood

Computer-games
guru Douglas
TenNapel had a

painful life growing up. He
found refuge in religion
and drawing and created a
company where he is mayor
but everyone shares power,
including partners such
as Steven Spielberg
and Bill Gates.

by Eric Celeste

Douglas TenNapel was in a world of hell. He was wading knee-deep in 120-degree molten cow fat, slogging through a poultry factory septic tank in goggles and gas mask, carrying a plastic shovel. He was wearing gloves and a hairnet. The machine blowing oxygen into the tank (so he could breathe) was so loud, he wore earplugs.

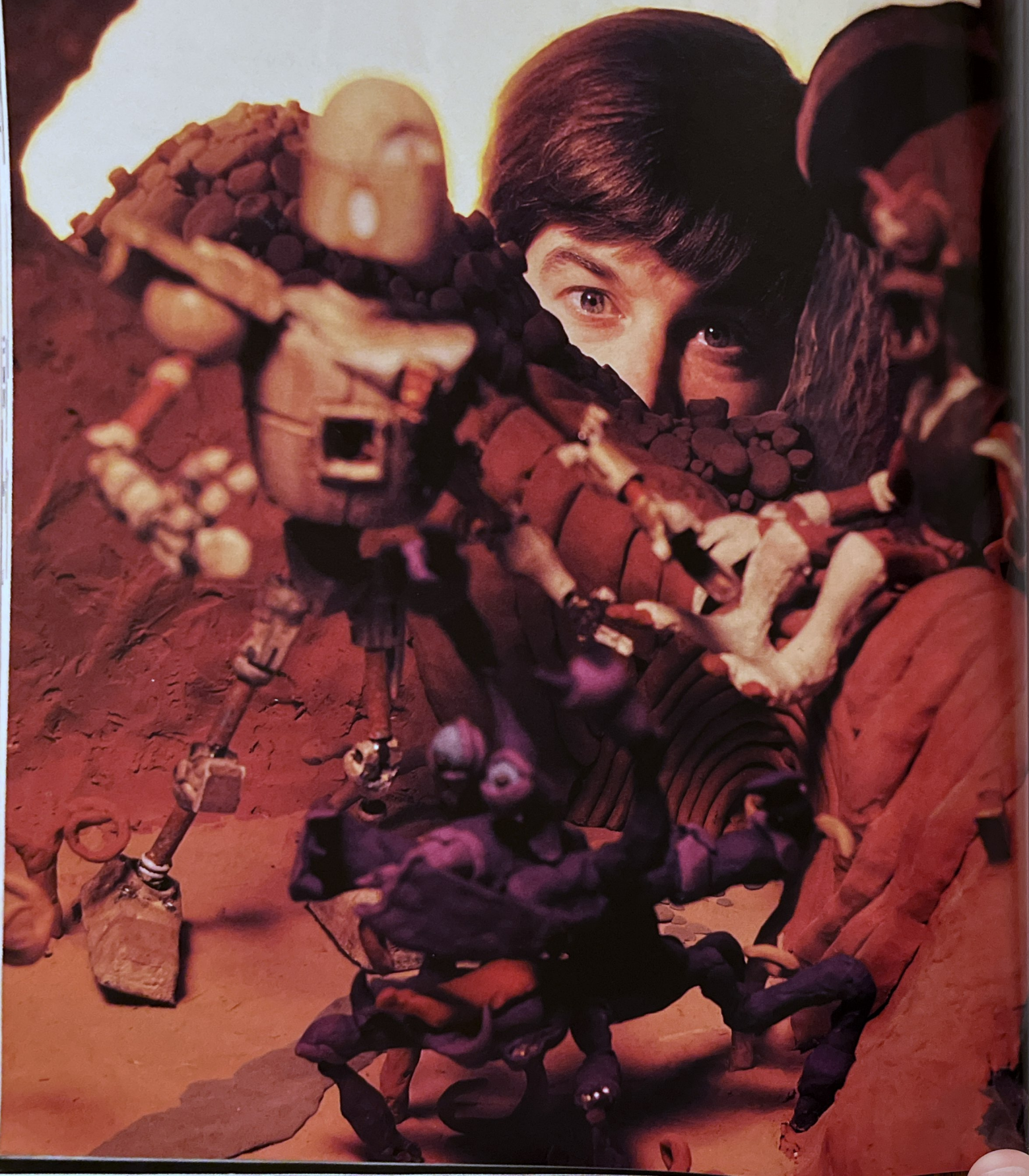
TenNapel, thirty, chuckles when he looks back on that summer job. He had been employed in some lousy jobs before and after this one in his hometown of Denair, California. He flipped burgers at Wendy's. He bussed tables at a Mexican restaurant. He had even shoveled maggots for a paycheck. He was cleaning the coagulated cow goo — which the company mixed with chicken feed to add fat to chickens — that had accumulated in the tank's drains, when the realization hit. "That was when I knew that Denair was no place for an artist."

No, the place for an artist, for an animator as white-hot and original as TenNapel, is right where he is: in The Neverhood, the small central California company he helped create.

Still, his world is a mess. Junk is everywhere: wads of clay on desks, graffiti on the walls, Seventies' artifacts, and a fifty-year-old Persian rug slapped down in the middle of The Neverhood, the two-story office in Mission Viejo, near Orange County. You probably would not suspect that TenNapel and his nine other employees are considered video-game big shots, partners with Steven Spielberg and Bill Gates. This world, in fact, looks like some comic book-cum-dorm room alternative universe, not the lair for a high-

photographed by Michael Grecco

The Neverhood



is an example of what

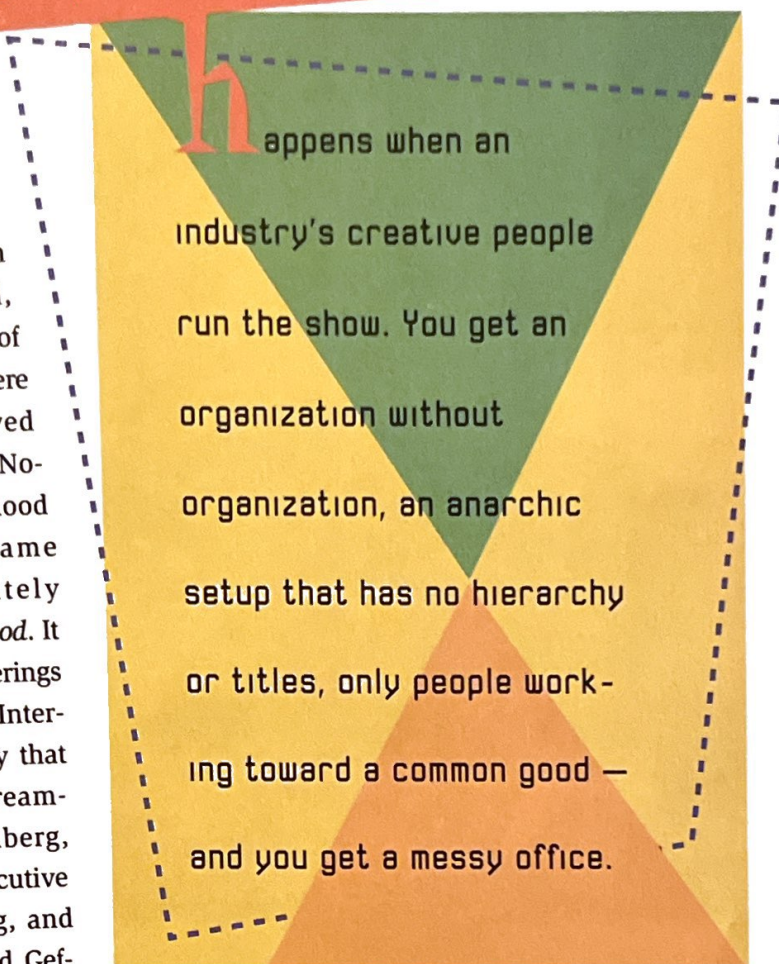
powered executive and his team of video-game studs.

But it is indeed in this workaday world, the big-money realm of computer games, where TenNapel has enjoyed quick success. Last November, *The Neverhood* debuted the PC game titled, appropriately enough, *The Neverhood*. It is one of the first offerings from DreamWorks Interactive, the company that is fifty percent DreamWorks SKG (Spielberg, former Disney executive Jeffrey Katzenberg, and music mogul David Geffen) and fifty percent Mi-

crosoft (Gates). *The Neverhood* is an example of what happens when an industry's creative people run the show. You get big contracts that garner press (a three-year, three-game deal between DreamWorks Interactive and *The Neverhood*); you get an organization without organization, an anarchic setup that has no hierarchy or titles, only people working toward a common good; and you get a messy office. "It's a giant dorm room," TenNapel says. "It's a dump."

All this would make good fodder for a quaint story about a quirky animator who, with a national stage built by the bigwigs at DreamWorks, is primed to become a success in the gaming industry. If he were to win PC-game rookie of the year, TenNapel probably would credit his God-given creativity, his strong religious principles, and his cast of talented Gen-Xtras, all of which formed the winning combination that propelled *The Neverhood* into some video-game hall of fame.

But TenNapel's real-life world isn't quite as simple and playful as the ones he creates. In fact, *The Neverhood* with its Mr. Bill-esque stop-



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motion claymation and *Myst*-style problem solving, did not sell well this Christmas. It is certainly nowhere near as popular as TenNapel's original breakthrough gaming creation, *Earthworm Jim* (star of two Sega Genesis video games and a Saturday-morning television show on the WB network). And his other Saturday morning show, *Project G.eeK.eR.*, which was number twenty-seven out of forty-nine Saturday morning shows in the ratings, was just dumped by CBS.

Despite the waves of favorable press TenNapel and his unique company have garnered, he must now brace for the inevitable media backlash. He must now set out to prove he was worth the pub.

"We got [some] great reviews" for *The Neverhood*, TenNapel says. "But that's all stuff that can be bought. More than anything, I feel good because we get about 100 letters a day from people who bought it, took it home, played it, and loved it. That's the only feedback I take into account."

Because that means those game players were drawn into a world he drew, or at least conceived. For TenNapel, connecting with fans, whisking them into his tales, means more than anything else attached to his company's success: more than proving his management style, or antistyle, can generate the success of *Earthworm Jim*; more than proving to past bosses that he was right in quitting because he felt a game's artists should reap the profits they've sown.

If people are enraptured with his game, he feels good. Because some folks don't just desire

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The Neverhood

(FROM PAGE 32)

a break from the real world, they need it to survive. TenNapel knows this. Such escapes got him through a very rough childhood. He found solace in the Bible, escape in his drawings, sense in the clay cities he set up in his room. It helped ease his mind, if only for a little while.

"I don't feel right talking about it now," he says very slowly, "because everything is fine now." He says nothing for about fifteen seconds. "But there was a lot of pain growing up. The worlds I drew got me through a lot of that."

Klaymen is in a world of wonder. He opens his eyes, blinks, and begins to explore. To get out of rooms so he can discover who he is and what his purpose is, he must solve puzzles and watch videos that describe how he and this world came to be. In between, he may take off his head or get squished unexpectedly by a giant fist.

Klaymen, star of *The Neverhood*, is the centerpiece of a game that debuted this past November with big names attached. Spielberg and Katzenberg had signed TenNapel and his cohorts to a contract in part because each of them (and Spielberg's son) had been captivated by *Earthworm Jim*'s humor and originality. *Earthworm Jim* and the sequel, about a worm in a suit with super powers, sold some 1.5 million copies, bringing in about \$60 million. The fit seemed perfect.

But TenNapel and his founding team (animator Edward Schofield and background artist Mark Lorenzen) came from platform games (Sega, Nintendo, etc.). Initially, there was a learning curve. As the deadline neared, some folks moved beds into the office. One-hundred-hour work weeks seemed normal.

Some 57,000 frames and three tons of clay later, *The Neverhood* came in

on time and under budget — nearly unheard of in the PC-game industry, where gamers clamor on Internet newsgroups for a game's release months before it ever appears on a store's shelves. What it didn't do was out-perform the other similarly slow-selling Christmas titles.

I'm not reducing the Bible to the level of myth. I believe it is true. But I used the strange occurrences in the Bible as a template for the *Neverhood* morality play."

"We were very pleased with *The Neverhood*," says Glenn Entis, head of (again, no titles) DreamWorks Interactive. "This type of game needs time to build from word of mouth. We consistently hear from people, 'I had no idea what this game was like.' Once more people get to play it, it will increase its rabid following."

It's true that, even before the game came out, analysts were downplaying sales expectations. Chris Elwell of Simba Information said upon the game's release, "Everyone, even DreamWorks, is realistic about the potential for this medium. It's a very limited market."

Entis acknowledges, though, that for big guns like Jeffrey Katzenberg and the rest of the DreamWorks team to entrust their first "game for a traditional gaming audience" to TenNapel required "a leap of faith. And there were a couple of junctures where, objectively, there was a real question if it would all come out okay. But everyone had faith in Doug. He's honest, clear, and he really understands the business. Plus, he's unusually self-critical. He makes sure everyone performs to a high level. He's the ringleader, and they're the band. It's a collective

vision, with Doug leading the way." It makes it somewhat easier, surely, that TenNapel and Spielberg respect each other. TenNapel pitched the idea of *The Neverhood* to Spielberg at the director's house. Spielberg's son loved *Earthworm Jim*, and TenNapel is known for making his business relationships personal. He makes a commitment to work hard for people he cares for, and expects the same in return.

Which is why it's understandable that TenNapel seemed overjoyed to announce that the company's next game, a *Neverhood* sequel, will be made for Sony PlayStation, not a PC audience. Given his past success in the game-cartridge arena, he seems more confident of success.

As for *The Neverhood*, TenNapel admits sales were down, but doesn't give numbers. Entis allows that not all reviewers liked the game, that some found it boring. But, he says, those were people used to traditional "twitch," or action, games. TenNapel does not disagree.

"We were one month into another PC game," he says. "And we just said, You know, we want to do a simpler game. PC games need to be deeper, brainier. And the bottom line is, PlayStation wants a fast-paced game. We just all felt a desire to go back to that sort of game."

He doesn't say much about it, other than to expect some "skull-monkeys" to do battle with Klaymen. Nor does he say if the religious parables that infused *The Neverhood* will be used for inspiration again.

"I have read the Bible and have found it a great source of inspiration for epic storytelling," TenNapel explains. "I'm not reducing the Bible to the level of myth. I believe it is true. But I used the strange occurrences in the Bible as a template for the *Neverhood* morality play."